

METHOD FOR SELECTIVE AREA STAMPING OF OPTICAL ELEMENTS ON A SUBSTRATE

BACKGROUND

5 Micro-optic components are typically used in imaging or optical interconnect applications. Conventionally, such optical components are manufactured by directly etching the desired shape into a suitable substrate using standard lithography and semiconductor processing techniques or by building a mold to allow injection molding of a thermoplastic to create the optical component. The first method creates
10 an environmentally stable optical component but is typically slow and expensive. The second method rapidly creates parts but is limited to thermoplastics that are unstable at elevated temperatures.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

15 In accordance with the invention, multiple micro-optic components on one or two sides of a substrate may be fabricated using a batch process. The substrate may then be diced into individual lens assemblies. A large number of optical lenses may be molded from an optically curable polymer on a suitable substrate. Alternatively, a thermally curable polymer may be substituted for the optically curable polymer. The
20 substrate may be then diced into individual lens assemblies. This typically allows finished lens assemblies to have the mechanical properties of the substrate. Metal alignment marks and optical elements may be patterned onto the substrate prior to optical lens fabrication.

 Typically, selective area stamping of optical lenses allows various optical
25 elements to be combined on a substrate by using multiple simple molds and processes

optimized for element function, mold shape and size. Different materials optimized for different optical elements may be used. If lenses are molded from a continuous layer of polymer as opposed to selective area stamping in accordance with the invention, all optical elements would typically be formed at the same time, from the same material and by the same process. Selective area stamping allows easy singulation in accordance with the invention. In selective area stamping, the optically curable polymer is not contiguous over the substrate which decreases breakage during singulation.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIGs. 1a-1e show molding of micro-optic components from an optically curable polymer material in accordance with the invention.

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FIGs. 2a-2d show molding of a stamper from an optically curable polymer material using a master in accordance with the invention.

FIG. 2e shows an alternative to FIG. 2a in accordance with the invention.

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FIGs. 3a-3b show another method for molding of a stamper from an optically curable polymer material using a master in accordance with the invention.

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FIG.s. 4a-4c show molding a stamper from an optically curable polymer material where optical elements are formed at the bottom of a cavity in accordance with the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

FIGs. 1a-e show an embodiment in accordance with the invention. FIG. 1a shows stampers 110 which may be molded from a master or stampers 110 may be directly fabricated as the inverse of the desired lens profile. Molding stampers 110 from a master is described further below.

Substrate 120 typically has metal alignment mark 140 to provide for alignment of stampers 110 with substrate 120. Molds 145 for the optics in stampers 110 may be made larger than the desired optics to allow for the shrinkage in optically curable polymer 115 (see FIG. 1b) when cured. The use of molded polymer optics is typically less expensive than molding or etching lenses from inorganic materials such as glass. Optically curable polymer 115 may be a UV curable polymer such as J91® or SK-9® available from Summers Labs or Norland 61® available from Norland. Use of green initiators such as titanocene dichloride or blue initiators such as camphorquinone, for example, allow curing under green or blue light conditions. With the use of the appropriate initiators curing can be shifted to different parts of the optical spectrum as desired.

In accordance with an embodiment of the invention, stampers 110 are typically coated with release layer 117 as shown in FIG. 1b. Providing release layer 117 on stampers 110 prevents molded optics 159 from sticking to molds 145 instead of substrate 120. Release layers, such as release layer 117 are typically made from polytetrafluoroethylene (e.g. fluorinated carbon) non-stick type materials. Optically curable polymer 115 is locally dispensed onto stamper 110. For example, optically curable polymer 115 may be mechanically dispensed. In an embodiment, optically curable polymer 115 may be forced through a needle or other suitable orifice using mechanical pressure or gas or liquid pressure. In another embodiment, screen printing

that forces optically curable polymer through holes in a suitable defined mask may be used.

In another embodiment, optically curable polymer 115 may be transferred to the surface of stampers 110 by contacting molds 145 of stampers 110 with a reservoir, such as a pool of optically curable polymer 115 or a porous material saturated with optically curable polymer 115 in a manner analogous to a stamping pad saturated with ink. Typically, care should be taken to control the amount of optically curable polymer 115 dispensed onto stampers 110 to ensure that coverage of optically curable polymer 115 is limited on substrate 120 once curing has occurred. Optionally, stampers 110 with optically curable polymer 115 as shown in FIG. 1b may be placed into a vacuum chamber in a degassing step to remove any trapped air pockets.

FIG. 1c shows the step of bringing locally optically curable polymer 115 coated stampers 110 into contact with substrate 120. Substrate 120 is typically a flat piece of material that serves a mechanical support function as well as an optical function. For example, substrate 120 may be substantially transparent in applications where light passes through the optical elements or reflective for optical elements that require reflection from the interface between substrate 120 and the optical elements. Substrate 120 may also be an active element such as a laser or detector. The surface of substrate 120 may be prepared prior to contact with locally optically curable polymer 115 coated stampers 110 to enhance adhesion of optically curable polymer 115 when cured.

The separation distance d between substrate 120 and molds 145, when optically curable polymer 115 begins to flow as substrate 120 and molds 145 are brought into contact with each other, typically determines the dimensions needed for gap 191 to function in accordance with the invention. The separation distance d sets

the approximate height and area dimensions needed for the size of gap 191 so that excess optically curable polymer 115 will collect in gap 191 instead of forming a thick film over substrate 120. If gap 191 has the appropriate dimensions as determined from the separation distance d , optically curable polymer 115 will tend to

5 move vertically up the sides of gap 191 as molds 145 and substrate 120 are brought together, reducing the thickness of the film formed on the surface of substrate 120. Use of release layer 117 enhances this effect. Gap 191 may be made larger than the dimensions described above to keep areas in and around elements such as semiconductor lasers on substrate 120 free from optically curable polymer 115.

10 Metal alignment mark 140 may be patterned on substrate 120 for alignment purposes and thin metal elements may be patterned on substrate 140 for optical functions such as, for example, a diffraction grating. Stampers 110 may be aligned to features present on substrate 120 prior to bringing stampers 110 into contact with substrate 120. Parallelism of stampers 110 and substrate 120 is typically controlled

15 using the bonding equipment. Stampers 110 and substrate 120 in FIG. 1c may be held together through the use of an applied force or by the weight of substrate 120. Once substrate 120 and locally optically curable polymer 115 coated stampers 110 are in contact as shown in FIG. 1c, stamper 110, optically curable polymer 115 and substrate 120 are exposed to light to cure optically curable polymer 115. For creation of single

20 sided optical elements, stampers 110 and substrate 120 are separated leaving molded optical element 190 on substrate 120 (e.g., see FIG. 1e).

FIG. 1d shows the configuration for making optical elements on both sides of substrate 120 in accordance with the invention. The process described above is repeated with bonded stamper 110 and substrate 120 serving as a substrate to make

25 additional optical elements.

FIG. 1e shows that multiple local stampings of optical elements 190 may be made on a side of substrate 120. Stamper 112 is removed and the process is repeated as many times as necessary. Each separate stamping of optical elements 190 may use different polymer materials, different stamping molds and different curing conditions to optimize the process. This procedure may be performed in parallel where an array of stampers 112 is used with different molds and different polymer materials

Molded optical elements 190 may be coated with anti-reflective coatings or reflective coatings, if desired, and substrate 120 with molded elements 190 is then typically singulated as required.

Some polymers used in accordance with the invention will not cure in the presence of air. Stamper 110 is designed such that excess optically curable polymer 115 is squeezed into areas where optically curable polymer 115 is exposed to air during the curing process. Following curing and separation of stamper 110 from substrate 120, excess uncured optically curable polymer 115 may be removed from substrate 120. For example, a solvent that preferentially dissolves uncured polymer such as acetone may be used. Hence, the remaining optical elements 190 have very little excess material allowing easy singulation and the requirements for precise volume control discussed above are relaxed.

For local stamping of optical elements, it is typically useful to have a specific shape characteristic for stampers 110. The desired shape in accordance with the invention has the molds for optical elements 190 (see FIG. 1e) contained within plateau areas 157 of polymer material. This typically allows more force to be applied to the local areas where the molding is taking place. Hence, when a fixed force is applied during the molding process (see above), the force is concentrated on plateau areas 157 where the molding is taking place instead of having the force being

uniformly distributed if stampers 110 had a more planar design where gaps 191 would be missing in FIG. 1e. This results in thin field regions, typically on the order of 1 μm to 2 μm where optically curable polymer 115 is squeezed between stampers 110 and substrate 120. Excess amounts of optically curable polymer 115 forced from
5 between stampers 110 and substrate 120 accumulate in gaps 191 at the edge of plateau areas 157 instead of being distributed as a field film over substrate 120. Also, if local dispensing of optically curable polymer 115 is used with a planar stamper having no gaps 191, excess optically curable polymer 115 will typically spread out as a large thick film over substrate 120 which is undesirable.

10 FIGs. 2a-2d show stamper fabrication in accordance with the invention. FIG. 2a shows stamper blank 210. Stamper blank 210 is a flat substrate which provides mechanical support for molding polymer 215. In accordance with the invention, stamper blank 210 is typically made of a material transparent to light.

Stamper blank 215 may be patterned with dicing marks 230. In this
15 embodiment, locally dispensed optically curable polymer 215 will tend to pool between dicing marks 230 on the surface of stamper blank 210 as shown in FIG. 2a. Another method of patterning stamper blank 210 in accordance with the invention involves scribing the surface.

Stamper blank 210 may also be patterned so that optically curable polymer
20 215 will wet only specific areas. For example, as shown in FIG. 2e, release layer 218 may be patterned by a photolithographic process to allow wetting of only specific areas. Alternatively, a shadow mask may be used to pattern release layer 218. Optically curable polymer 215 is then typically dispensed locally as described above.

FIG. 2b shows master 250 typically coated with release layer 217 to prevent
25 optically curable polymer 215 from sticking to master 250 and alignment of master

250 with the local areas of optically curable polymer 215 on stamper blank 210.

Because master 250 does not provide an optical function, master 250 may typically be made from a wide variety of materials such as, for example, silicon, metal, glass or plastic and may be fabricated by many different methods. The features of master 250

5 may be made larger than the desired final features of the optical elements to accommodate shrinkage of optically curable polymer 215 during curing. Master 250 may have optional alignment features such as relief 291 that are transferred to mold 245 at the same time as the optical elements (see FIG. 2d).

Parallelism of stamper blank 210 and of master 250 is adjusted accordingly in
10 FIG. 2b. Then, stamper blank 210 and master 250 are brought into contact as shown in FIG. 2c. External force may be provided to hold stamper blank 210 and master 250 in contact. Light is applied to cure optically curable polymer 215. FIG. 2d shows resulting stamper 211 with mold 245 separated from master 250 including optional alignment feature 292 transferred to mold 245 through use of relief 291.

15 FIGs. 3a-3b show stamper fabrication in accordance with the invention. With reference to FIG. 3a, stamper blank 310 is coated with a blanket layer of optically curable polymer 315 using dip coating, spray coating or other suitable coating methods. Master 350 is coated with release layer 317 to prevent optically curable polymer 315 from sticking to master 350. Stamper blank 310 is brought into contact
20 with master 350 while parallelism of stamper blank 310 and master 350 is maintained. Light is used to cure optically curable polymer 315. FIG. 3b shows resulting mold 345 and stamper 311. Stamper blank 310 and master 350 are separated after optically curable polymer 315 is cured. Regions 375 are removed either mechanically by dicing or milling or chemically by etching to provide stamper 311.

The process may remove just the excess portion of optically curable polymer 315 or also part of stamper blank 310.

FIGs. 4a – 4c show stamper fabrication in accordance with the invention.

Master 450 has optical element shapes 435 formed at the bottom of cavity 495.

5 Master 450, including optical element shapes 435 are typically coated with release layer 417. Optically curable polymer 415 is locally dispensed on master 450 to fill cavity 495 as shown in FIG. 4a. In practice, there typically are a number of cavities 495 with optical element shapes 435 on master 450 to allow creation of stampers 411 in parallel.

10 FIG. 4b shows master 450 with dispensed optically curable polymer 415 and stamper blank 410 being brought into contact with one another. Light is then used to cure optically curable polymer 415. Finally, master 450 and stamper blank 410 are separated leaving stamper 411 with cured mold 445.

While the invention has been described in conjunction with specific
15 embodiments, it is evident to those skilled in the art that many alternatives, modifications, and variations will be apparent in light of the foregoing description. Accordingly, the invention is intended to embrace all other such alternatives, modifications, and variations that fall within the spirit and scope of the appended claims.

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